

# *City of Taunton*

## *Office of the Mayor*

*Thomas C. Hoyer, Jr.*  
*Mayor*

*Alyssa Gracia*  
*Chief of Staff*

*Gill E. Enos*  
*Budget Director*



*141 Oak Street*  
*Temporary City Hall*  
*Taunton, MA 02780*  
*Tel. (508) 821-1000*  
*Fax (508) 821-1005*

**Mayor Thomas C. Hoyer Jr.**  
**State of the City Address**  
**January 20, 2015**  
**Chester R. Martin Municipal Chambers**

Council President Estele Borges and members of the Municipal Council, State Legislative Delegation, members of the School Committee, Department Heads, and honored guests. Tonight, while we look ahead to 2015, we also look back on 2014. We reflect on our triumphs and challenges, and we look ahead to our future.

Opiate abuse has swept through our nation, the Commonwealth and this region. Unfortunately, our great City was not immune and was hit hard. The numbers do not lie: in 2014, we had 209 reported overdoses and, sadly, 14 deaths as a direct result of opiate abuse.

I clearly recall the cold winter day when our Police Chief Ed Walsh called to inform me that on the previous day 8 people, Taunton's sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters, had overdosed on heroin. These eight people added to the alarming number of overdoses that we had already endured that year. In that moment, I knew we could no longer quietly address this issue. It was abundantly clear that we needed a new approach to how we treat addiction in our community, and I knew this was a monumental challenge, and a challenge too grave to face alone. We didn't know exactly what to do or how to fix it, or what the end result would be, but we knew we had to try, we had to step up.

We put together a series of forums and we invited the community. The turnout was more than we could have asked for: first responders, teachers, parents, students, city officials, our State delegation, the District Attorney, counselors, prevention and treatment specialists, medical professionals, the inter-faith community, former addicts, and family members of individuals suffering with addiction. There was a panel of speakers, resources, and most importantly, a community conversation. During that conversation we listened, and what we heard was clear: we needed to do more.

I take tremendous pride in saying Taunton has stood up and fought back. We were one of the first communities, if not *the* first community in the Commonwealth to publically address this issue. We did not run away from the problem or pretend it did not exist, but instead, we ran towards it, mobilized and said, "Enough is enough". A

brave group of citizens stepped forward because they did not want to see this happen to another person or another family. Courageously, they shared their intimate family issues and heart ache for all to see. They are the reason opiate abuse is no longer a dirty little secret that families feel they need to hide from, but it is a public health crisis that needs to be dealt with just like any other illness. The City of Taunton played a key role in bringing this issue to the forefront and I commend former Governor Deval Patrick and our own Federal and State delegations for their proactive approach, and after speaking with Governor Charlie Baker and Attorney General-elect Maura Healy, I know that the aggressive effort at the state level will not only continue, but strengthen. In his inaugural address, and again in private conversations I have recently had with him, Governor Baker solidified his pledge to do more.

I truly believe that the pro-active approach that we took here in Taunton was the correct one. It took the courage and efforts of many, but together, we have made an immense difference. I commend Cory Palazzi, his Mom Lori Gonsalves and his Stepfather David. The public service announcement they filmed, with the assistance of the Dr. Julie Hackett and Steve Jacques of the Taunton School Department, as you viewed tonight, was spot on. It has been viewed by all of our middle school students to go along with the assemblies they have hosted and participated in. The sharing of their personal story will go a long way in helping kids understand the perils of opiate abuse. I need to mention Barry, Kristie and Matt Sanders not only for sharing their story, but also working towards having a Learn to Cope Chapter open right here in Taunton. From the bottom of my heart, I thank Sue Cyr, who lost her son to the disease of addiction, but she has spoken up to try to prevent this tragedy from happening to another family, and also Sue Malloch-Taylor who volunteered to serve on our forum panel from day one.

In April, we started the Taunton Opiate Task Force in order to bring individuals from diverse backgrounds, those that have worked with or been affected by opiate addiction, together to communicate issues, collaborate on solutions and combat opiate addiction in Taunton. The Taunton Opiate Task Force is made up of passionate people from all walks of life, is filled with ideas, hope, and most importantly, compassion.

Dealing with addiction is certainly not in the Mayor's training handbook, but I know we took the right steps and there have been so many City Officials and others that have gone above and beyond the call of duty. I have to recognize our Police Chief Ed Walsh and the Taunton Police Department, who have coordinated with state and federal law enforcement agencies, to aggressively warn the public of the dangers of the deadly heroin strain and punish those that peddle this poison. I thank Chief Tim Bradshaw and the members of the Taunton Fire Department, who selflessly accepted the assignment to carry Narcan, which has been proven to save lives. Dr. Julie Hackett and our School Department, who have not only assisted in making the documentary with Cory, but have made sure that the message has been delivered to our children of the dangers of opiates not only to themselves, but the devastation these drugs cause families. Many of our young people have suffered in silence while dealing with an addicted parent. I say *no more*! Opiate addiction is now a permanent part of the Health and Wellness Curriculum in the Taunton Public Schools. To Ellen Bruder-Moore, who has volunteered to chair the Mayor's Opiate Task Force, and all of the individuals and organizations that have volunteered to participate: thank you for your dedication and devotion to this issue! To all the members of the Taunton Opiate Task force who have made the most precious contribution of time: thank you!

Our City did not stop there. The Taunton Board of Health applied for and was awarded a grant for a sharps disposal kiosk. My Office, along with the City of Fall River and Town of Dighton, applied for and was

awarded a ten year, \$550,000 grant to implement local policy, practice systems and environmental change to prevent the abuse of opioids, and opioid overdoses. The same assemblage has also applied for a comparable grant to curb underage drinking. It is important that we not only combat, but that we also understand, substance abuse as a community before it starts.

Through the collective efforts of many, the overdoses have dramatically decreased, but unfortunately they still occur far too often and it is going to take a continued vigilance to continue to chip away at this problem. It will take a community-wide effort, not simply individual ones. My friends, you have my commitment that these efforts will continue!

Besides the opiate issue, there are many other exciting topics to discuss. My friends, the state of our City is growing stronger. We are continuing to improve.

Financially, we are in a much better position today than we have been over the last several years. We have reinvested savings directly back into our community, so that it can best benefit our taxpayers. Our Capital Planning Committee is currently reviewing all of our assets to compile a needs assessment, so that we may systematically repair and upgrade our public buildings and infrastructure, and not leave the burden to the next generation. Last week General Fund Free Cash was certified at over 6 million dollars, this is certainly welcome news and it will greatly assist us with our capital needs.

We will continue our strong relationship with the Massachusetts School Building Authority so that we can upgrade and, if necessary, replace our aging school buildings, so that our children have the best environment in which to learn. Crucial renovations to our downtown parking deck will begin soon so that the facility will be utilized once again. My administration will continue to make targeted investments in our City to make it a better one, for all to enjoy. Through our continued efforts on economic development and social issues, we demonstrate that the City of Taunton is not just a city of words, but a city of action. A city of action is one that does not just plan for today or tomorrow, but provides a roadmap for well into the future, and we will do just that.

I take tremendous pride in the City of Taunton. I am so proud that in FY15 my administration in partnership with the City Council, and I do mean partnership, has hired new patrolmen. In the past, our number of police personnel has become critically low, and I am proud to say we are finally turning the tide and we want to make our great city as safe as it possibly can be. Our Police Department does tremendous work, but it simply needs more personnel to work alongside the dedicated officers on the job now. You have my commitment tonight that we will expend every effort to continue to grow the Police Department to the best of our abilities.

After years of chatter, we have finally hired a full time grant writer. We welcome Karen Schnabel to our City. She will work out of the Mayor's Office of Economic and Community Development and she will be available to assist our Department Heads in seeking State and Federal funds. Ms. Schnabel, her experience, and this position will be a great asset to the City of a variety of fronts.

I am delighted in the City of Taunton and the visible progress that we have made in regards to our abandoned, blighted and dangerous properties. The City of Taunton's Law Department has worked aggressively under the leadership of City Solicitor Jason Buffington and Assistant City Solicitor Daniel deAbreu who have made notable progress in pursuing abandoned property owners. Case by case they have successfully led the City to

take possession of blighted and dangerous properties improving our neighborhoods and the Downtown area. I take pride in our great City and take tremendous offense when others do not do the same.

In these cases, a picture is worth a thousand words. The first example is on High Street Extension. This property, on the banks of the Taunton River, was aggressively pursued in court and the two dilapidated houses on the property became a burden to City and the neighborhood. Trash that piled up throughout the property included cars and a boat. The City was awarded possession of the property in May 2013 and completely demolished the structures shortly thereafter. You can see the amazing transformation in the photos.

In its honored history, 115 Tremont Street was once a working farm, a popular neighborhood retail garden shop, complete with a store, greenhouse and residential buildings. Unfortunately, past glory turned to misery as it became the single most decrepit property in the City. It was a complete eyesore for its neighbors, especially those that abut the property. The greenhouse and residential buildings were filled with trash and littered with health and building code violations. The once thriving garden center was left to deteriorate and treated as a dumping ground. In 2012, the City initiated legal proceedings, and in December 2013, the City was awarded ownership after a land court ruling in the City's favor. Demolition began last summer and was completed during late fall. As you can see by these photos, a picture is worth a thousand words. I am excited that we now get to write the next chapter of this glorious piece of property and make it something that we can all be proud of once again.

I am proud of the City of Taunton and the great work happening Downtown, highlighted recently by the razing of the Star Theatre. This once grand building turned into urban blight, a building which was structurally unsound and dangerous to pedestrians, motorists, and nearby properties. Again, the Law Department went to court and scored significant victories. Our City made the over \$600,000 investment to raze this structure because it was necessary for health and safety and the eventual rebuilding of our historic City Hall. Once the clean-up is complete, we will begin the planning stages of the revitalization of City Hall, the economic heart of our City. Folks the time has come to rebuild City Hall!

Downtown revitalization efforts have also been evidenced by the improved partnership with Bristol Community College. In September, BCC opened its doors at the former Taunton Catholic Middle School and has given Taunton a full time higher education presence right here in the heart of our City. Thanks to the longtime collective efforts of Senator Marc Pacheco, our Legislative Delegation, and the City of Taunton, a long sought dream has finally become a reality. Now our focus turns towards making this a permanent campus, so that our residents can have the opportunity of higher education and work force development right here in our own backyard.

Speaking of education, I am thrilled to recognize the great work of Dr. Julie Hackett and our Taunton School Department. In 2014 our graduation rate has risen to almost 90%, while our dropout rate is down to 1.7%. These numbers are remarkable and serve as an example of the tremendous effort of our administrators, educators and students in our district. Personalized instruction, along with our district's bottom-up approach, demonstrates that the district's motto "children come first" is put into practice daily. I am proud that my own children attend our Taunton Schools and I look forward to the continued success of the district.

The Mayor's City Charter Advisory Committee has been working diligently in studying our City Charter and the charters of other cities. Our present City Charter last underwent serious revision in 1909, when Taunton

was a much different place. It is my expectation that this dedicated group of volunteers will in the coming months make recommendations to me as to how we can modernize our frame of local government. I will in turn review those recommendations and make my own presentation to the Municipal Council. I fully expect this to be a very transparent process, with ample opportunity for public input and debate. It is my hope that this issue will be resolved by the end of 2015.

I take pride in the City of Taunton and the relationship between our City, the Taunton Development Corporation, and Mass Development. Phases 4 and 5 of the Myles Standish Industrial Park are coming to life before our very eyes. New businesses such as Columbia Gas, Sullivan Tire and soon the Martignetti Company will call the MSIP home. The Martignetti Companies represents an approximate \$100M investment, the retention of over 800 jobs, and the purchase and reuse of over 115 acres of land on the former Paul A. Dever campus. This project is a great example of economic development at its best, and came to fruition due to the efforts of many, at all levels of government, to create a private-public partnership that worked. We are thrilled a company with such a positive reputation in corporate citizenship, such as the Martignetti Company, has chosen Taunton for its new home.

The business park will also soon include an incubator center, which will give entrepreneurs real opportunity to hone their projects, allow access to specialized services, and stay connected with the local and national biotech industry, without the unwanted risk of financial peril.

The Mass. Life Sciences Center, which will be located at the park, will house the STEM education center, a collaborative relationship between Bridgewater State University, UMASS Dartmouth, and Bristol Community College. The center is currently undergoing a survey to best determine its pathway in determining its most practical course of action in its mission to provide workforce development and targeted investment in not only our community, but the entire region. This Center will be a welcome addition to our City.

I take pride in our City, but we must continue to raise the bar and not be satisfied with the status quo. While we have hired new patrolmen in our Police Department, we must continue to work with our state and federal legislators to seek funding to hire even more. We have a top notch Police Department that is overworked and undermanned. We have hired security guards to provide an extra set of eyes at some of our City parks, which will once again allow young families to enjoy our recreational facilities. The program is working and I plan on expanding it in the spring.

I am committed to the purchase of a new fire truck this coming year, so that our talented and dedicated firefighters have the best equipment available. We must continue to provide the best resources and training so that all of our great City departments can engage in best practices so that we can serve our citizens to the fullest extent of our abilities. Through the great work of Paul Arikian and Matt Burns the Wide Area Network has been implemented in our city offices. Now files can be accessed quickly for increased productivity. The Wide Area Network also provides the foundation to implement improved technology such as Voice over IP, IP video for security, live streaming of city meetings and increased disaster recovery. Our online opportunities for permitting and payments have improved, and will continue to evolve, so that we may provide our residents access to government from the tips of their fingers.

I am proud of our efforts to make our city more accessible to those with disabilities. Our community has invested \$110,000 for a comprehensive evaluation of ADA compliance of City facilities and programs, which

will serve as the basis for our ADA Transition Plan. The evaluation has been ongoing and a report to the Municipal Council is expected in February. Our FY15 budget also contained \$500,000 to improve curb-cuts and sidewalks. Our City will continue its strong partnership with GATRA to provide improved pathways around our bus stops scattered throughout Taunton. You have already seen the benefits of this relationship in our Weir section. Our overall investment in ADA infrastructure, which includes Chapter 90, a Hope VI grant and GATRA, total over 1 million dollars in this fiscal year alone.

One of Governor Baker's first acts was to release the remainder of the Commonwealth's Chapter 90 monies to cities and towns. Chapter 90 money is used specifically for roadway improvements. In Taunton this means the addition of over \$710,000 in FY15. Taunton has made tremendous roadway improvements over the past several years, much to the credit of Commissioner Cornaglia and his team, but since our City has over 302 miles of streets, the most in the state of Massachusetts, we must continue to do more. I humbly call upon our State Delegation to work with the Baker Administration to augment our Chapter 90 funds in the next budget cycle, so that we may continue to service our aging infrastructure. I am also calling for the purchase of a Dura Patcher, a machine that will allow us to permanently repair potholes in the winter months. This machine will go a long way in expediting repair requests. Tonight, I am asking that the Municipal Council transfer an additional \$500,000 from stabilization to be dedicated solely towards roadway improvements.

I take pride in Taunton and our very special community events. Despite a little rain, the 101<sup>st</sup> Lighting of the Green and Lights On Festival was a tremendous success. The Taunton Green display, with its unconventional bright blue and pink *Frozen* themed lights, was beautifully decorated and will be remembered for many years to come. The traditional Liberty and Union weekend, which celebrated our 375<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a community, was a success. Our Miles with the Mayor Road Race saw its participation grow in 2014. All proceeds from the race go towards the Mayor's Worthy Cause, which in turn supports local scholarships and charities. Our kids track series, which is run by our Parks and Recreation department, had over 100 children competing some weeks. I am excited to announce that in the end of 2014, Taunton was, for the first time, deemed a Mass in Motion community. Through my office and with the support of the Old Colony YMCA we were awarded a \$110,000 Department of Public Health grant to be used towards promoting healthy lifestyles including farmers markets, community gardens, and identifying safe walking trails in the city.

As I close I would like to thank my wife Stephanie, my children; Sophia, Tommy, and Lilah, who without their love and support I would not be able to do this job that I love. I have to mention and thank my Chief of Staff, Alyssa Gracia, who simply does it all in my office and is a huge part of our successes. Mimi Punda continues to do a wonderful job in assisting with the needs of the public, and Budget Director Gill Enos continues to do a great job leading our financial team. Jason Buffington and Dan deAbreu do great things in our law office and go above and beyond each day. I also have to thank all of our Department Managers and employees, who we often ask to go above and beyond the call of duty, for their continued efforts on a daily basis.

My friends change and improvements do not happen overnight, but they happen through long term commitment and planning. To the citizens of Taunton tonight you have my commitment that we will continue to work diligently to once again make our community great. Taunton has to continue to reinvest, reinvent and rejuvenate itself. Let's raise the bar, let's raise the expectations, together let's do more. Thank you and God bless you all!